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CI 509

Being a Shadow

I shadowed a sophomore named Jenny[[1]](#footnote-1) through her daily schedule of French I, Extended Period, Math, Language Arts, Chemistry, and World History. Discovering how Jenny learned, finding out how she juggled school and extra-curricular activities, and following her through the day was an eye opening experience.

Jenny was energetic and she talked a lot during class, but she told me that she “only goofs off after my work is done.” She said that because she is on the cheering squad and has practice from 2:30-7:30 every day, she tries to get as much work done in school as she can. She said “cheer and school are my life” but added that she liked to volunteer in the community as well. This weekend she was working with her mom and some friends at The Race for the Cure.

I asked Jenny about different groups at school and she named quite a few: Emos, Jocks, Smart Kids, Popular Kids, Theater Kids, Goths and Druggies. She told me that she belonged to a “stationary group” and that other students moved in and out of their circle. During the only break of the day we ate lunch at the “fishbowl,” and Jenny explained that many of the “other groups” didn’t eat there. For example, most of the Theater Kids ate over by the auditorium, some students ate at tables outside, and small groups or individuals sat at benches and tables throughout the hallway. The Popular Kids sat in the center of the fishbowl and other groups sat on the perimeter.

During lunch we discussed school spirit and Jenny said that it was low this year because many of the seniors were Druggies. She said that they did not deserve to have the freshmen looking up to them. During lunch, a freshman came over to our table and read jokes from the sheaf of papers in his hands. All of the girls listened to him and laughed at his jokes. At one point, when he had his back to me, Jenny mouthed the words “special needs” and explained, after he left, that he does this every day. The girls were matter-of-fact about his unique way of interacting with them and the attention they gave him was sincere—there was no eye rolling or mockery. She told me that earning her classmates respect was important and would continue to be important when she was a senior.

Jenny was very social and was well liked by her peers and instructors. After lunch I asked her about her favorite subjects and teachers. She told me she loved math but didn’t enjoy history and the teacher was only part of the reason for her dislike. She said that all of “the talking” was difficult to follow (the teacher’s lectures) and memorizing historical facts was hard. She had already mentioned that working in groups made learning easier because if she didn’t understand something she could bounce ideas off of the other students and use their knowledge as well as her own. It was interesting to note the different teaching styles the instructors had in these two subjects. When I walked in the classroom, the math teacher encouraged me to sit with the table group and ask questions. The history teacher asked me to sit along the wall where I could observe but not participate. The math teacher spent most of her time walking between the table groups of 4-6 students, interacting with them, and encouraging them to think about the problems instead of just doing them. In contrast, that day’s history lesson was taught in a more traditional format. The teacher stood at the front of the class and called on students to answer questions or make comments. The room was not set up in table groups but, instead, the tables were in rows in front of him. He did have an amazing PowerPoint presentation that caught their interest, but as the hour progressed I saw that Jenny was struggling to stay awake.

Jenny had many of the attributes listed on *40 Developmental Assets.* She had a strong support system at home and the relationship she had with her friends helped her stay focused. Being actively involved in cheering gave her a sense of being a Skyhawk, but she also built a close connection with the greater Portland community through her volunteer activities. Jenny believed that being a role model for other students was important and incorporated that into her daily life. Because of the homogeneous makeup of the school (the overall socio-economic status is high and there is a very small minority population), it is difficult to tell if Jenny’s race or ethnicity has any effect on her success and connection. Her SES does allow her to benefit from the advantages of going to a school that has financial and volunteer support from the community as well as the availability of advanced technology (like document cameras in every class and access to new computers). However, I think it is her strong support system, drive to succeed, and work ethic that contribute to her success at school. Furthermore, these would not change even in a small learning community. In fact, after my day as a shadow I realized that discussing small learning communities is unproductive unless there is a commitment to lowering class size. It is impossible for teachers to give students individual attention when they have 35-41 of them in every class. Small communities with large student/teach ratios won’t benefit anyone.

If asked to narrow down my experience, I would say that there were two things that I learned. First of all, a classroom is not *just* a place for gaining knowledge but is also a place where social connections are made and community is developed. Additionally, the teachers I observed who listened actively, were aware of activities in the school community, and expressed a genuine interest in things that were important to the students better held their interest. Prior to this experience, I didn’t think about the importance of small group discussions (mixed with a little bit of socializing) or of teachers being aware of and interested in the community they share with the students. I believe now that by trying to sever these social connections, teachers and administrators make it more difficult for students to see any relevance in what they learn in the classroom. These two things as well as continued interaction with the students in my Language Arts classes will give me lots of food for thought as I continue my student teaching.

1. Not her real name [↑](#footnote-ref-1)